

# **PLACES TO LIE: STORIES**

A Thesis

by

TRENEE SEWARD

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS**

May 2009

Major Subject: English

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## **ABSTRACT**

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This thesis presents a collection of three short stories written or revised during my graduate tenure at Texas A&M University. Thus, what follows offers a solid example of the creative writing and literary knowledge obtained through creative writing coursework and support from English departmental faculty. In order to review my research methodology, I have provided an introduction to discuss each story's development and literary influences. These stories, entitled "Imagine a King," "Bleach Everything," and "Dotting the Iris," explore themes of sacrifice, the incompatibility of happiness and truth, and the benefits and dangers of silence. However, the overarching theme revolves around the injurious treatment of things that should be considered sacred, namely self, family, and history.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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A special thanks to my graduate peer, Elise Elliot, for her words of encouragement and for making sure I turned in all of the necessary forms by the required deadlines. I would also like to thank my mother who acted as a first reader and inspired me with her questions and insights.

Finally, I want to acknowledge and thank God for His many blessings.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Places to Lie* is a collection of three short stories created or revised during my master's studies at Texas A&M University. In this introduction, I explore the development of these stories and detail the non-fiction research pursued. I titled this collection "Places to Lie" to make obvious that characters within these stories have resisted the truth. Jewell Parker Rhodes notes that, "history is very much fictional. I mean, we can talk about how certain events happened, but people's perceptions and detailing of that history sometimes result in a work of fiction" (594). Rhodes concept of history being reliant upon the imagination of the individual provides the basis for my works. In "Bleach Everything," "Imagine a King," and "Dotting the Iris," I wanted to demonstrate that familial history or historical events and details can be omitted, ignored, or revised at the leisure of whoever tells the story best.

During the creation of *The Known World* (2003), Edward P. Jones explains that he decided to do little to no historical research for his text about black slave owners in Virginia. ZZ Packer comments that she has researched endless documents, watched numerous films, and visited historical sites in order to offer an accurate portrayal of the lives of the Buffalo Soldiers for her untitled future publication. In describing the imaginative process behind *Jubilee* (1966), Margaret Walker also mentions the countless historical texts she reviewed in order to write the fictionalized account of her family's

slave history. Initially, I began my stories in the same manner as these authors. I knew that I wanted to create one story about a sundown town, a place where blacks are unwelcome after sunset, another about Martin Luther King's relationships with women before his marriage to Coretta Scott King, and a yet an additional story about a plantation tour guide. In order to develop these story ideas, I too reviewed numerous books and generated endless notes for the sake of characterization and plot. In the sections that follow, I detail this research and the interconnecting story themes.

### **Imagine a King**

"Imagine a King" deals with family members trapped within a *Jeopardy* game gone wrong. In the midst of being outsmarted by his son (who remains unnamed), Thurmond takes a couple of *Jeopardy* questions about Martin Luther King and uses them to reveal his version of a friendship with the slain Civil Rights leader. Although his wife is unwilling to participate in the tale, Thurmond involves her in his fictionalized history as he twists reality with a believable substitute. I chose the story title because, while Thurmond provides some factual information about King, he has also created an imaginary image of him as a close acquaintance. This story begins my exploration of themes that concern history and truth versus truth and silence.

The original concept for this story revolved around my interest in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s adulterous affairs. I reviewed Georgia Davis Powers' *I Shared the Dream* (1995), but was unimpressed with the subtle hints of her momentary love affair with King. The need to know more led me to the autobiographies of Ralph David Abernathy

and Coretta Scott King, individuals seemingly closest to King. By this time I began to understand that what I really sought was a presentation of King that provided the flawed human side that the media often avoids. For example, knowledge that King smoked cigarettes, danced well, or wanted to marry a white woman make the real-life image of him more real—especially for an individual who didn’t grow up in his lifetime. I discovered these “real” details in Michael Eric Dyson’s *I May Not Get There With You* (2000) and Stephen B. Oates’ *Let the Trumpet Sound* (1982). Interestingly enough, one of the many things I found in these books was information on King’s social and private life before Coretta.

With a new idea in mind, I decided to attempt the story of fictional character Benita Lamar, one of King’s previous real-life fiancés. But the story didn’t move. I had a bad case of writer’s block. My thesis proposal idea, to make King an unnamed, but historically identifiable character, brought about a significant challenge—a research challenge that would require more than my allotted time. In the end, I combined my acquired knowledge of King with a story that I originally submitted with my graduate admissions application. I felt that a total revision of this story would best demonstrate my overall growth as a fiction writer.

### **Bleach Everything**

In “Bleach Everything” Liz is a domestic worker for Zeldona Pierre, a black woman passing for white. Liz’s main daily chore is to assure that the Zeldona’s dark-skinned daughter is cleansed of the more obvious traces of blackness. In addition to



Zeldona's child, Annie, Liz must also find the time to care for her own talented mulatto son—a child Zeldona adores more than thought possible. As Zeldona figures out a scientific measure to finally rid her daughter of her dark skin, the plan backfires and she turns to Liz. Zeldona attempts to convince Liz to exchange her son for the darker child. The title for this story demonstrates Zeldona's obsession with cleanliness in her home, whether this involves the dirt black of her daughter's skin or the dirt on her floors. The titled suggestion to bleach everything includes Zeldona, who seems to need a mental cleanse of her own.

This short story idea came about while browsing James Loewen's *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism*, a title that examines the measures taken to keep blacks in their place and out of white communities. One portion of the text features news articles depicting racist acts, illustrations of discriminatory signs, and photographs. One photograph in particular features Elizabeth Davis, a black woman surrounded by white children and adults, with a caption that reads:

Elizabeth Davis and her son were the only exceptions allowed in Casey, Illinois, until well after her death in 1963 at 76. She was a nurse-midwife, and this 1952 newspaper photo was accompanied by a poem, 'A Tribute to Miss Davis,' showing Casey's respect for her. At the same time, Davis was known everywhere as 'Nigger Liz,' and Casey at one time boasted a sundown sign at the west edge of town. (N. pag.)

The photograph caused me to question several things, like why would Elizabeth Davis remain in a town knowing that other blacks are unwelcome? Why would she openly

allow the town people to call her “Nigger Liz” to her face—or did they? What were her feelings toward black people? What kind of experiences did she have in a racist town where the people supposedly loved her? In addition, I began to consider potential conflicts for Liz’s situation. What would happen if there was a couple in the town who everybody assumed was white—a passing couple? What would happen if Liz worked in their household?

In the midst of my inquiry, I encountered a passage in Lawrence Otis Graham’s *Our Kind of People: Inside America’s Black Upper Class*, a book that introduces readers to the exclusive world of the black elite through interviews and stories. One chapter in particular discusses tales of passing and offers a list of rules for doing so. Rules such as, “Relocate to a new community that insulates you from interacting with blacks and that is at least a few hundred miles from your families home,” and “Change your last name to one that is not associated with black family names” (381). Originally, I felt that this list of seventeen rules and the first-person accounts included would somehow aid in the character development of the Pierre family.

Unfortunately, as I began writing, the sundown concept did not reveal itself as planned. After some consideration, I decided to instead attempt to answer Graham’s question of “what happens to the child of passing blacks” (389) and further developed this idea with knowledge of scientific skin bleaching acquired from Harriet A. Washington’s *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (2007).

## **Dotting the Iris**

Ira Jean is a modern tour guide at Monroe Plantation. At this particular historical site the owner, Buddy Monroe, has chosen to portray plantation life as he sees fit. Needless to say, Ira Jean's tours are confined to scripted accounts that often overlook or ignore actual history. The story begins with Ira Jean's final Saturday tour where a scholarly black couple shows up and coaxes her to tell the true history of the plantation, as she knows it and in conjunction with provided textual knowledge. In the midst of one of her storytelling moments, Buddy overhears everything from outside and proceeds to put her in her assumed place. The title, "Dotting the Iris," is taken from the idea that painters dot the iris to make the eyes of a portrait look more real, so that the eyes will follow you wherever you go. Like the eyes of the portraits, the eyes of the tourists and Buddy Monroe are generally always on Ira Jean.

The impetus for "Dotting the Iris" derives from three specific instances. During a trip through the South a couple of summers ago, I visited a Louisiana plantation. I took photographs, asked questions, and privately conversed with the black female tour guide who announced that blacks rarely visited the plantation. The tour guide didn't offer any further comments on her observation, but her statement intrigued me. During her tour, one room in particular, "the white room," is noted as the place where the family threw parties and welcomed visitors. I used a photograph of this room as an ekphrasis (or ecphrasis) for an assignment in Professor Janet McCann's fall 2007 creative writing course, English 622. This assignment eventually developed into a short story originally titled "The Historical Interpretations of a Plantation Tour Guide" for Professor Larry

Heinemann's spring 2008 course, English 624. Based on Professor Heinemann's feedback, three different versions of the story were created, each one different from the other in length, style, and point of view. For my thesis, I originally wanted to maintain the plantation tours premise and incorporate a mother-son conflict. My purpose would have been the many forms that the destruction of history can take on. The damage includes omitting historical details, making history tourist friendly, and overwriting history as a whole for modern interests. However, in order to deal with the actual plantation tour directly, I omitted the mother-son conflict.

"Dotting the Iris" is about a plantation tour guide, so in the end, I felt the best way to present the story would be to allow her to give an actual tour. While I have visited several plantations for insight into such tours, I relied heavily upon Southern Accent Press' *Historic Houses of the South* (1984). This text provided a visual and descriptive presentation of plantations throughout the South—details that are usually the main focus of tours. Based on this book, I was able to piece together interesting architectural pieces from numerous plantations instead of relying upon one for inspiration. While Ira Jean would offer tourists information about the construction and past residents of Monroe Plantation, the key to her scripted tours is that she promote features that will increase profits and focus on the whiter elements (i.e. portraits and room colors).

James Lowen's *Lies Across America: What Historic Sites Get Wrong* provides a necessary clue for an element that should be left out of Ira Jean's tour. Lowen writes, "As at most plantation mansions . . . guides mention slavery as little as possible;

‘sometimes the institution of slavery is left unmentioned altogether’” (208). While Lowen helped me to focus the scripted side of Ira Jean’s tour, I still needed to gain a better understanding of tourist reactions. Former Myrtles Plantation owner Frances Kermeen details in *The True Story of America’s Most Haunted House* that “Occasionally people who considered themselves experts on a particular era of history or antiques would try their hardest to intimidate the tour guide, in a bid to show off how smart they were” (57). This quotation inspired my portrayal of the African American couple that allows Ira Jean to provide scripted facts, but never without challenging the information.

## IMAGINE A KING

My parents were of average intelligence, until *Jeopardy* came on. Since the days of Pac-Man and Transformer undies, I sat on the couch between them and listened to the verbal battles over the show's most difficult answers. Daddy refused to believe anybody knew more than him. Over the years, he'd crushed several remote controls as he squeezed them like an answer buzzer or banged them repeatedly on the TV dinner tray whenever anybody got too many answers right. *Jeopardy* and PBS were the only things my family watched on a regular basis. If we weren't yelling at Alex Trebek and his contestants, we were watching or reading something to help us prepare for the next episode.

"My, my, my..." Daddy said, leaning forward in his leather recliner as I unfolded a wooden dinner tray in front of him. Before I could properly adjust things, Daddy nudged me in my ribs with the television remote and motioned for me to move out of his way. I playfully punched his arm and turned to see what had him adjusting his eyeglasses.

For several minutes we both stared in silence at the three women jiggling their rumps and kicking up their stilettos to a bass-dropping beat. Daddy and I stared at the three women jiggling their rumps and kicking up their stilettos to a bass-dropping beat. They had the kind of bodily shapes and curves that I fantasized about at night in my twin-sized bed in the back room. The one that still had the same Houston Astros sheets Mama bought twenty years ago on it. It seemed appropriate for a room that I'd lived in

for the past thirty years of my life. I convinced myself that mine was the life of a struggling muralist who's work often went criticized and unappreciated. The only place I displayed my work now was on the walls of my bedroom.

"Your mama use to look like that." Daddy licked his lips. "She use to dance around just like that, she was a Soul Train regular, I'm trying to tell you." I laughed to myself and tried to imagine my then forty-year old Mama booty bumping her way on down a line of afro and platform shoe wearing dancers. "They look good, don't they?" Good enough to be out of my league. "What's that they're singing about?" I shrugged. "Remind me of this group I used to like when I was growing up--The Terrell Sisters, except they ain't never make it big—they were big girls though." Daddy let out a chuckle. "The only women I'd ever seen sang 'Amazing Grace' with a chicken bone in they mouth."

"If they weren't so busy eating up everything, maybe they would have had more time for their performances." Mama entered the living room unnoticed and winked at me just as I turned around. She made it quite obvious that bed was the next thing on tonight's agenda, based on her shabby robe and the pink sponge rollers in her hair.

"You didn't even know those girls, Benita. So you can just hush up your mouth." Daddy twisted around in his chair and frowned up his face. Mama had ruined yet another one of his stories.

I stepped aside and watched as Mama touched Daddy's shoulder and placed a plate of pot roast, mashed potatoes, and green beans before him. Without a word of gratitude, Daddy held out his hand for the fork and napkin he knew she would offer next.

Still staring at the television, he instructed her not to add any ice to his sweet tea, like she didn't know his preferences by now.

"*Jeopardy* time, huh boy?" Daddy peered over the top of his eyeglasses and stared over at me. Daddy's hair had been fully grey and his eyes bad since the day I was born. My parents waited some time before getting married and even more time before having their first child. Mama had no problem admitting that Daddy never wanted children, so my birth was a definite accident. Growing up, family members claimed I looked like my mother's twin, wide nose and lazy eye included. Others argued that I took after my father, but his genes probably caused me more than my share of grief growing up. My pouty pink lips oddly contrasted my blue-black skin and caused its share of jokes and fights as a kid.

"Yes, sir. You ready for your usual butt whooping?"

"You the only one that ever gets butt whoopings in this house." Daddy grunted and leaned back in his chair as I took a seat on the nearby couch. "...Beat me at *Jeopardy*..." Daddy continued to mumble as he pressed the buttons on the remote. It was clear that we still had a few minutes of *Wheel of Fortune* left as Pat and Vanna surrounded the night's winner. How old were those two anyway?

At the sound of the closing theme, Mama returned with two plates full of identical food—pot roast, mashed potatoes, and green beans. She placed one on the television tray before me, checked to make sure Daddy and I had what we needed and lowered herself into the couch seat between us. Mama put her plate in her lap, preferring to slump over her food as she fed herself in small fingernail sized nibbles.



Once Mama settled into her seat Daddy began his plate inspection. He sat up in his recliner, turned the plate counter clockwise, and then clockwise. He leaned in close, sniffed the food as though he had some kind of canine senses. He moved a few things around with his fork. Satisfied with the meal, he folded his hands, closed his eyes, and moved his pink lips in prayer. After a loud ‘Amen,’ he glanced over at me and Mama before finally lifting a heaping forkful of pot roast into his wide open mouth.

The *Jeopardy* theme music played in the background as we smacked our food offbeat. By the time Alex Trebek began his contestant and category introductions our plates were halfway empty. Daddy, usually the first to finish, loudly slurped his tea, wiped his mouth, and pushed his plate and TV dinner tray away. No matter what happened the night before, Daddy always considered himself the reigning champion, but he always needed certain questions to maintain his imaginary status. History and sports topics were his thing, but he never failed to surprise us with other random things he knew. Mama had the religious, animal, and geography questions. I held it down with science, art, and all of the categories Mama and Daddy specialized in. We were a family of non-cable television watchers and non-fiction readers, so our *Jeopardy* time was a chance for us to demonstrate what things of value we’d taken from our pseudo studies.

I stuffed my face with one last scoop of mashed potatoes. Mama pushed a green bean into her mouth with her fingers before checking first my and then Daddy’s plates. I was sure she’d ask why I hadn’t eaten all of my food yet, as she always did. Before she had a chance I clapped my hands together, scooted to the edge of my seat, and pretended to suck the meat out of my teeth to get Daddy’s attention.

White bold letters established tonight's six categories and each offered five questions. Based on each right or wrong answer, contestants had a chance to win or lose between \$200 and \$1,000. For score sake, Daddy had already pulled out his tattered notepad to scribble down who led our current living room challenge. Mama and I had to keep our own mental notes since we knew Daddy liked to 'forget' to add totals for correct answers—but never hesitated to write in bold letters deductions for wrong answers.

"Name this European city and you've named a Las Vegas hotel." The white letters filled the blue screen as Alex Trebeck narrated for us.

"What is Monte Carlo?" I said quickly.

"Monte Carlo!" Daddy shouted at the screen as he fell back into his chair.

"You're too slow old man—you can't be yelling answers after me. And you didn't even say it in the right format. You know the rules." I waved my fork in his direction before filling it with another bite of meat and vegetables.

"Just shutup, boy. We taught you how to play this game, remember?"

I answered several more questions in the same category, certain of a few that the other show contestants drew blanks on. Mama and Daddy quietly sat, but only Daddy gave me the evil eye. His looks couldn't shake me.

"This woman's book, *The Majesty of the Law: Reflections of a Supreme Court Justice*, is a collection of speeches and essays on legal history."

"Who is Sandra Day O'Conner?"

“Don’t nobody know or care about that.” Daddy said as he turned up the volume.

“Thurmond, you haven’t even touched your food yet.” Mama said, tapping his plate with her fork. Had he given his approval of tonight’s dinner ten minutes ago, she would have been fine.

“You just saw me take a bite.” Daddy talked over Alex’s next answer as I motioned for him to be quiet. “I need some salt and pepper. You know I can’t eat without my seasonings.” Mama put her plate on the glass coffee table before us and eased out of her seat in senior citizen time.

“When Einstein made his famous comment, ‘God does not play dice with the universe,’ he was expressing doubts about this theory of matter.” I squinted at the screen as Alex read the next answer aloud.

“What is Quantum mechanics?” I answered and rolled my eyes. It was hard to imagine that it took twelve writers to come up with such weak trivia.

“Stop all that yelling in here like you know the answers.”

“You know I know all this stuff, Daddy. Stop hatin’.”

“Ain’t nobody hatin’. You heard your Mama just say she had a headache.”

“I didn’t hear nothing.”

“Hush! I’m trying to hear the next question!”

“Quantum mechanics is correct. John, your next selection.” Alex’s voice filled the room again as Daddy turned up the volume to tune me out. Mama reappeared with the salt and peppershakers and Daddy snatched both from her hands without a thank you.

He immediately began seasoning a ridiculous amount onto his food as though he wanted to cover up some taste he didn't like. When he finally stopped, he sampled a piece of meat and then seasoned the food even more, staring ahead at the television the entire time. Mama sat back down after the necessary head nod from Daddy.

“Complete these lines taken from Martin Luther King's tombstone. Free at last/  
Free at last/ Thank God Almighty . . .”

“I'm free at last!” Daddy shouted at the screen with a mouthful of food.

“Who doesn't know that?” I laughed.

“Be quiet, boy. I marched with Martin. Them white folks don't know King.” He said pointing at the television again with his pinkie.

“What is ‘I'm free at last.’” John, the long-haired contestant answered to prove Daddy wrong.

“I marched with Martin!” Daddy shouted again, like that made a difference.

“That's before your time, you don't know nothing about it.” He said to me.

“Thurmond.” Mama attempted to calm him, before taking another nibble of food. He behaved like this every night, letting himself get riled up over some category and then dismissing himself to the bedroom without even a good night.

“Martin Luther King use to date your Mama. Tell him, Benita.”

Mama stiffened. “I don't want to talk about that tonight.”

“Mama dated who?”

Mama shook her head and touched her mouth to silence me.

“Are we gonna talk about King or are we gonna play *Jeopardy*?” I said, guided by Mama’s subtle plea. “Let me know now, cause I have plenty of books in the back that we can use as reference.”

“We don’t need your books in here, boy.” Daddy turned down the television. “I almost had to steal on Martin, and you can bet he wasn’t talking no non-violence mess back then. ‘Let’s take it to the grass,’ that’s what he liked to say all the time. ‘Let’s take it to the grass,’ like he was so damn tough. I wish I had a fire hose for his ass back then.”

“Thurmond, enough.” Mama flapped her hand in his direction and tried to continue eating.

Alex’s voice managed to cut through Daddy’s noise. “He is the author of these lines: He gives his harness bells a shake / To ask if there is some mistake. / The only other sounds--”

“Who is Robert Frost?” I answered before he finished.

“*You don’t know!* The contestants don’t even know. This is about the sorriest bunch I ever seen on the show. You know why they won’t let me on here though don’t you? I’ll tell you why . . .” Daddy scooted to the edge of his recliner and patted his knee for my attention.

“Robert Frost.” Mama said and nodded.

“Make sure you’re getting all these points down. Don’t start all that cheating tonight like you do.”

“You do like to cheat, Thurmond.” Mama stared down at her plate and scraped the last bit of mashed potatoes up with her fork.

“Time’s up, your response should have been ‘Who is Robert Frost.’ Robert Frost.” I tried to hide my smile as I recalled what a sore loser Daddy was.

“They need to pick that King category again, them white folks don’t know none of them answers, watch what I tell you.” Just as he said it, a contestant selected the category again and Alex proceeded with the answer.

“The name of this Southern city appears both in a 1953 Manifesto and in Dr. King’s letter from this city’s Jail.”

“What is Birmingham?” Daddy shouted at the screen as I twisted my lips to the side and rolled my eyes again.

“Who doesn’t know that, Daddy? Let me be more specific, what old black person doesn’t know that?”

“Birmingham.” Mama chimed in.

“You better watch your mouth, boy. I told you I knew King—before you was even thought of I was out there with King marching and singing. Matter of fact I was in the jail across from him in Birmingham when he was writing all those letters. I helped him with his spelling and proofread all that mess for him. I remember telling him, ‘Martin, you sure you wanna say it like that?’ He wasn’t as bright as people thought he was, you know?” Daddy bumped his glasses back up on his nose and shoveled more food into his mouth. “And I couldn’t half bring your Mama around cause he was always up in her face skinnin’ and grinnin’.”

“Thurmond—”

“All they ever wanna show of him on television is him doing that same old ‘I Have a Dream’ speech, but me and your mama knew Martin like you wouldn’t believe. Him and Coretta ‘you-better-stay-in-the-house-with-them-kids’ Scott King.”

“Thurmond, please.” Mama said wiping her mouth with a paper napkin. “Let the dead rest. I thought we were playing a game here anyway. Who’s winning?”

“Yeah, Daddy, are you writing down our points?” I leaned over Mama to grab for the spiral notebook and Daddy snatched it back. When I didn’t withdraw my hand fast enough he pretended to stab me with his butter knife.

“I walked up on Martin at a party one time, now this is before he went off to that church school to be a pastor, you know? Anyway, I walked up on him at a party while he was dancing with your Mama and I said, Martin I need you to back up off my girl. He was a lady’s man, you know? He called it hero worship, but I use to call it something else.”

“Thurmond, when was I ever at a party with Martin Luther King?”

Daddy stood and ignored Mama. Knowing he had our full attention he stepped directly in front of the television set and began moving his bare feet in a two-step before snapping his fingers a few times.

“I’ll give it to him, the boy knew how to dance. Everybody knew Martin could get down on a dance floor, but his Daddy wasn’t having it—”

“Thurmond, this story is getting ridiculous now. Have a seat and let us finish watching *Jeopardy*.” Mama whined.

“He wanted to marry your Mama. Had promised her a ring and everything. She sat around waiting and waiting. Then he showed up with that pretty little light-skinned gal. I heard he taught her how to dress and everything—Co-retta. You know who I’m talking about. Told her all she could do was cook, clean, and stay in that house with them kids. He let her come out to sing sometime, though.”

“You know that woman marched with him.” Mama said.

*“Sometimes.”*

“Daddy, are we gonna play the game?” As usual, I didn’t know whether Daddy’s story was true and decided that I didn’t want to be bothered with questioning the details for a change. Instead I tried to focus him on the television again.

“Martin took your Mama’s virginity, you know that? Ask her about it right now.”

I looked over at Mama who still had her head down as she finished off the last few bites of food. She pretended not to notice us for as long as she could.

“I figure a black woman would want people to know something like that. I know I’d brag about it. Tell us, Benita.”

“Leave me alone with all that foolishness, Thurmond.”

“Me and Martin became cool—after I whooped his ass over your Mama. Whooped his ass so bad he started talking that turn the other cheek mess. He ain’t want no more ass whoopings like that.” Daddy danced around a bit, swinging his fists in front of him like a broke down boxer.

“Is this true, Mama?” I didn’t want to get interested in Daddy’s story, but I couldn’t help but ask. I’d held back most of my questions until now since understanding



this wasn't the first time that a *Jeopardy* match had resulted into one of his 'I knew so-and-so' tales. He did it so often that it was hard to figure out what part of the story was true—if any of it at all. If you let him, Daddy would tell you he knew all the black historical leaders in one context or another. Even if the leader happened to have lived before Daddy was born. As a kid I remember him telling me that he was the one that taught Fredrick Douglass to read. He even claimed he was the one who told George Washington Carver that he needed a tasty spread to go with his jelly sandwich. How he managed to travel through time and state lines to meet all these famous blacks was beyond me, but I tried to allow him his edited moment in the history books.

Mama shook her head and flapped another dismissive hand in Daddy's direction.

"Martin had a lot of women though. Top of the line type women. Then he got that little light-skinned one, Co-retta. She had some nice hair, I'll tell you that. He settled down a little bit when he got with her, but he still got around. That's why he told her to stay in the house. He said you can march wherever you want, as long as it's with my son on your hip and right here around this house." Daddy doubled over in laughter and stood straight again to catch his breath.

"Funny you say that Daddy, because I watched this documentary awhile ago where King was doing this interview, right? And the kids were playing around and being loud, so Martin goes, 'Excuse me a minute,' and then he yells 'CORETTA, COME GET THESE KIDS!' It was the strangest thing, you know, because—"

"I told Martin," Daddy interrupted. "Don't you go to Memphis. I felt something was gonna go down so I said, Martin, don't go to Memphis. He wanted me to go with

him, but I was like, not this time, Martin. You hear what I said to him? I said, not this time, Martin.”

“So you and Mama knew King personally?” It seemed strange that I hadn’t heard the story before. As badly as I wanted to get back to *Jeopardy*, it seemed wrong not to give Daddy’s story the benefit of the doubt.

“Your Mama use to make dresses for Coretta. That woman didn’t know her husband had taken your Mama’s virginity though.”

“Thurmond, please with all these lies.”

“Yeah, me and Martin go way back. I remember one day I told him, Martin, we need to organize us a bus boycott. I’m tired of walking to the back all the damn time. I want to look out that front window every now and then, you know?”

“When did you and Mama live in Atlanta *and* Montgomery, Daddy?”

“Never.” Mama said.

“I said I knew Martin goddamn it!” Daddy hollered, nearly knocking over a few family pictures behind him. “Who in here said I didn’t know Martin? If you say it you’re a goddamn lie! I told him don’t go to Memphis. I said Martin, them white folks will kill you in Memphis—matter of fact, he asked me to go with him cause he didn’t trust Jesse. Your Mama didn’t want me to go either, she knew how Martin was when Coretta wasn’t around. But I’ll tell you what, when it all went down, Jesse called me on the phone and told me the real deal. I was like, damn Jesse, for real?”

“Ok, Dad.” I mumbled.

“This one time when we marched, I was standing next to Dick Gregory and I said, ‘You know what, Dick, when you write that book you been talking about, you know what you should name it?’ And he looked at me all surprised and he said—”

“Thurmond, enough. Now if you’re going to sit here and tell those lies, then turn the damn television off because you’re obviously tonight’s entertainment. You’re giving me a headache with all that shouting and fussing.”

“Well, go to bed then. We don’t wanna hear your mouth either. Don’t be getting mad with me cause I told your business. Maybe you should write a book about that, help buy your son his own house.”

“My son is fine right here.”

“This woman did publish a book about her affairs with Martin Luther King, Mama. I have the book in the back if you wanna see it.”

“That’s right, what was the name of that book?” Daddy tapped his temple with his finger.

*“I Shared the Dream.”*

“That’s right! *I Shared the Dream*. You say you got it in the back?”

“You know who took my virginity, Thurmond.”

“I don’t know nothing...”

“So don’t sit up in here in front of our son and pull me into that nonsense you’re telling.”

“If you told the story you could tell it how you want to, but since you ain’t, I’m gonna tell it how I know it.”

Mama didn't say anything. Instead she picked up her empty plate, along with mine, and went to the kitchen.

"You want some Peach Cobbler, baby?" She shouted back once she'd arrived.

I was the only one she called baby in this house, so I knew she was talking to me.

"No, m'am."

"Are you sure? It's still warm and I just bought a jug of milk for you this morning. Peach cobbler and a glass of milk, how does that sound, baby?"

"Will you cut out all that noise in there? We trying to watch *Jeopardy!*!" Daddy made his way back to his recliner and turned the television volume back up to drown out anything Mama might say.

"Oh shutup. I just wanted to fix the boy--"

"Then just do it and be quiet. We don't wanna hear about what you bought from the store and who wants the biggest piece. Just bring us both a plate and sit down. You getting on my nerves tonight—got my blood pressure up already."

"Your blood pressure ain't up cause of me, it's up cause of all that salt you put on that food—"

"Woman, will you hush?" Daddy gripped the recliner arms and twisted around in his seat to get a good look at Mama. I'm certain she ignored him. "Fooling around with y'all I done missed the whole show. Gotdamn!"

"It'll be back on tomorrow." I said.

“Y’all ain’t gonna do nothing but talk through it again.” Daddy turned off the television and glared at me. “You think you know so damn much, don’t you? Know so damn much and all you good for is painting some pictures on walls.”

“Thurmond?” Mama called from the kitchen. “Did you say you wanted some cobbler?”

“I want some of those cookies you baked the other day.” Daddy hollered back. “Your Mama used to live down the street from this man named Amos. He was always burning up some cookies, talking about he’s gonna be famous one day. I said, Famous, huh Amos?” I laughed along with Daddy since the lie was an obvious one.

“Thurmond? I thought you wanted some cobbler?” Mama returned with two bowls filled with so much cobbler that I had to wonder if she had invited some other people over for desert.

“I said I wanted some cookies.”

“Ain’t no more cookies.”

“Then I don’t want nothing but for you to leave me alone tonight.” Daddy gripped the armrests on his recliner and pulled himself forward until he could stand again. Mama and I watched, uncertain of what to say or do. He moved toward us, shoved his finger in my cobbler, sniffed it, and then sucked the finger clean.

“Are those canned peaches or fresh?” He asked.

“Don’t play with me, Thurmond.”

Daddy was already gone before he heard her reply.

Mama smiled at me. “That man is giving me a real headache tonight.” She took her seat and placed both bowls of peach cobbler in front of me. “I left your milk on the counter.” Mama rubbed the back of my head and kissed my cheek.

“Don’t worry about it, Mama. This is fine.” I had a couple of bites of the cobbler and nearly choked on sweetness.

“Your Daddy did know Martin, you know.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, he worked with him on some job when they were kids.”

“In Atlanta?”

Mama nodded.

“But I ain’t never known Martin or Coretta.”

“Soon as I left I knew you’d be out here telling them lies.” Daddy poked his head around the corner and waved his finger in Mama’s direction. All I could do was try not to choke on my cobbler and laughter.

## BLEACH EVERYTHING

In the morning calm of the yellow kitchen, Liz ran her finger down a list of bath ingredients. Reminded of what she needed, she measured five fresh squeezed lemons, three teaspoons of bleach, and a half-quart of milk into a large pitcher and carried the mixture up the back staircase. She knew Annie awaited her in the upstairs bathroom. The sun had yet to rise and already the child was wide-awake, wrapped in a plush white bath towel, crying. Each day she stood in the center of the floor and waited for what seemed like an unfortunate punishment. Liz mumbled good morning, ignored the girl's tears, and emptied the contents of the pitcher into the claw foot tub.

Without instruction, Annie shed her towel and allowed Liz to lift her into the cold water. The usual ritual ensued. Liz kneeled and reached for the scrub brush. Several circular motions covered every crease and crevice of Annie's dark-skin—nighttime skin, the child's mother joked. At only 30 years old, Liz's knees were already bad and she shifted every few minutes in search of a more comfortable position. Her knees provided little comfort as she scrubbed Annie's skin or Mrs. Pierre's floors—certain to bleach everything. Like her own pain, Liz disregarded Annie's sniffles, wiggles, and chest heaves as Liz repeatedly dipped the brush into the bath mixture and tried not to cause any bleeding with the porcupine bristled brush. She knew she could only stop when Mrs. Pierre appeared in the doorway satisfied.

"Doesn't she look brighter today?" Mrs. Pierre smiled. Liz nodded, but never bothered to look in the woman's direction. "Do you think it's the bleach or the lemons?"

“Don’t know, ma’m.”

“What do you think, Stampson?” Liz glanced over her shoulder, surprised by her own child’s presence. Stampson, who most people mistook for five instead of eight and mulatto instead of simply black, stood in front of Mrs. Pierre still in his favorite dinosaur pajamas from the night before. The pants covered everything except his toenails and the sleeves barely reached his wrists. He rushed to hug Liz’s neck, kissed her cheek, and offered her a chipper good morning. Liz wanted to pull him close and love him like she did when nobody else was around, like she’d never seen Mrs. Pierre love Annie. Like Liz would never consider doing to Annie, a child that she was only paid to care for. Instead she tried to be gentle in pushing her own baby aside and continued with the chore to ready Annie for another day of tears and whining.

“If you hurry up and get Annie out of the way, I’ll give Stampson his bath this morning—how about that, Liz?” Liz cut her eyes at Mrs. Pierre, considered a ‘hell no’ response, but showed a few teeth for what almost resembled a smile and nodded. Just a few more months and she’d have the money she needed to get out of that redheaded demon’s face. Sometimes she swore that woman’s eyes were more red then green. They haunted her in her nightmares. Liz thought it something strange to see a white woman with such a wide nose and thick lips, but Annie’s presence proved her suspicions true. Mrs. Pierre said the child had a skin disease.

Stampson was four years older than Mrs. Pierre’s child. While Annie spent most of her day crying, Stampson spent most of his entertaining. When his singing and yelling wrecked Mrs. Pierre’s nerves, Liz had the lolly sticks and marbles handy for him to head



out to the shaded porch. If Mrs. Pierre looked a little down, Liz called Stampson in to play her a song on the piano. When Stampson spoke fast and crazy, Liz handed him one of Annie's *Dick and Jane* books. And should Mrs. Pierre have company, Liz was certain to make the boy disappear whenever possible.

While Stampson took his bath, Liz sat nearby and spread *Skin So Lite* cream all over Annie's naked body like cake frosting, letting it soak into the child's skin before wiping most of it back into the jar. All the while, the two women secretly watched each other handle the other's child. Liz assessing that Mrs. Pierre wasn't too rough with her boy, and Mrs. Pierre assuring that Liz followed whatever directions she'd given about Annie's skin regime.

Mrs. Pierre grazed Stampson's body with soap, tickled him here and there, and caressed his ringlets of blonde hair. Stampson giggled, but not too hard, since he knew his mother was nearby. Liz continued to rub Annie down with cream, as the child's tears became a main ingredient.

"Sing my song, Stampson." Mrs. Pierre backed away from the tub, kicked off her house slippers, and lifted her nightgown above her ankles.

"Aw, Mrs. Pierre—"

"I told you a thousand times to call me, Aunt Zeldona."

Stampson eyed his mother again as she motioned for him to do as her boss asked. Mrs. Pierre was already dancing, kicking one foot out, then the other. She stiffly moved around the bathroom waving one finger around and lifting her nightgown a little higher with the other.

“Caledonia! Caledonia! What makes—”

“Put my name in it, like we talked about the other day.”

“*Zel-do-na! Zel-do-na!*” He sang with more heart. “*What makes your big head so hard! I love her. I love her just the same.*”

“Sing it from the beginning—and then later I want you to play it on the piano again. He’s so good, Liz. He needs an agent.”

“Yes ma’m.” He didn’t need an agent; all Liz had to do was get him to California, like she planned. Her cousin happened to be a chauffer for Stepin Fetchit and in her letters she always mentioned that he was just the celebrity to know in Hollywood. Liz hadn’t heard anything from this cousin in some months, but his neglect only drove her to work harder and save money faster.

Stampson stretched out his arms in front of him and pretended to finger an imaginary piano as he continued his song. When he reached the end, he started another, and Mrs. Pierre kept dancing, until she finally tired herself out. Annie never joined in or bothered to notice her mother’s foolery. By the time the two had finished their show, Annie was dressed and Stampson at least had on his undies.

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The next morning was the same as the last. Liz readied the ingredients, put Annie in her bath, and watched Mrs. Pierre and Stampson’s song and dance afterword. She made the usual ham and cheese omelet for Mrs. Pierre. Annie had oatmeal. Stampson had ham, jelly, and toast. Everybody had milk. Liz had nothing since there was no time. Before she could begin to hot comb Annie’s hair, she bleached and cleaned the kitchen.

There was nothing she hated worse than beginning on that poor child's nappy head and then having to stop because Mrs. Pierre found a patch of grease on the stove. Sometimes Mrs. Pierre even had the nerve to sniff the air to see if she could still smell this mornings breakfast instead of the clean scent of bleach.

Liz twisted the knob for the gas burner, watched the blue flame rise, and placed the iron comb right into the heat. Annie sat on her stool, already rubbing the tears building in her eyes. Liz considered a word of comfort, but remembered other occasions when it hadn't made a difference. Like the time when Mrs. Pierre said they had to start using a new soap. Liz put on her biggest smile and told Annie how sweet she would smell afterward. The tears rolled. Like the time Mrs. Pierre told Liz to keep the child out of sight while her friends came over for tea. Instead of doing as told, Annie tried to question why Stampson didn't have to do the same. Liz shrugged before revealing Old Maid cards. The tears ruined the deck. There were countless other times not worth mentioning, and Liz decided she just didn't want to offer her cup of comfort any more. She'd preserve it for her own child who rarely needed it.

"Before you get started with that," Mrs. Pierre's high heel shoes clacked across the tile floor as she entered the kitchen carrying a box under her left arm. "I have something new we're going to try." She always had something new. Something she claimed would work *this time*.

"From what I hear, we'll only have to use this every four weeks. In the meantime, you won't have to be bothered with that hot comb. What do you think about that, Liz?"

She thought nothing about it.

“That’s fine, Mrs. Pierre.”

“I knew you’d love the idea.” Mrs. Pierre pulled the white container from the box and waved it right in front of Liz’s face. “Perma-Strate! I hear it’s all the rage in some of the major cities and I had someone send a couple of containers. All you have to do is rub it in her hair, let it sit, and then we wash it out. That’s that, can you believe it?”

“I have an old magazine upstairs with Dinah Washington—”

“Does she have a skin disease like my precious little Ann?”

“No ma’m, Dinah Washington is—”

“Well, you better get started. I have a whole list of other things for you to do today.” Liz held out her hand as Mrs. Pierre placed the product on the counter before rushing out of the kitchen again.

“Are you sure you want me to use this on this child’s hair?” Liz called after her, but she was already gone. She hesitated for a moment. Even waited another second for Mrs. Pierre to rush back into the kitchen with more demands. But when she didn’t return, Liz twisted off the lid on the plastic jar and took a subtle whiff. She was lucky she’d never have to use anything like it on her own hair. She may have been as dark as Annie, but she’d been blessed with what most called good hair, the kind that hung down her back and in loose waves. Liz pitied the girl and considered braiding the child’s hair again, like she did when she first arrived, but Mrs. Pierre swore little white children wore no such styles. Liz started to mention that Annie was by far nothing close to white, but she kept her mouth closed and took the braids back down.

“1, 2, 3, *gimmie my cup a tea*, 4, 5, 6, *I need my suga fix* . . .” Stampson peeked into the kitchen with his favorite cowboy hat on, singing a song he’d probably just made up himself. “What are you doing now, Mama?”

“My hair.” Annie whispered.

“I ain’t talking to you.”

“What’s that stuff you’re spreading on her head? Is that more of that lightening cream that don’t work none?”

“It does work.” Annie held up her hands to show Stampson her white palms.

“But the rest of you is still just as black as the bottom of my shoe.” Stampson cackled with laughter. “I wrote a song about you girl. Listen here, *I know a gal named Annie Pierre, Annie Pierre got the nappiest hair* . . .”

“Was that very nice, Stampson?” Caught by his biggest fan, Stampson straightened and turned around slowly. Mrs. Pierre squatted to make direct eye contact and hugged the boy.

“No ma’m. I’m sorry, Annie.”

“Now, that’s better.” Mrs. Pierre studied Liz’s perm application, criticizing her in her mind before allowing the words to cross her lips. “You’re not putting enough on. I want you to use that whole jar. I want it to be as straight as can be.”

“I don’t think that’s how this stuff works, Mrs. Pierre. If you put on too much or leave it on too long, it could burn her.”

“I didn’t ask you.” Mrs. Pierre nearly knocked Stampson backwards as she rushed to snatch the container and comb from Liz’s hands. She wanted to slap the

woman for talking so fresh, but thought better of it. It was hard to find good help these days. Besides, Annie seemed to like her.

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Liz began the next morning almost as she had the others. She gave Annie her bath, rubbed the *Skin So Lite* cream on, and listened to Stampson sing one of his songs from the claw foot tub. Mrs. Pierre was too busy deciding on an outfit for the day to join them with her choreographed dance moves. She'd known all week that she planned to have lunch guests today, but had decided to tell Liz just this morning. It didn't bother Liz, she had enough patience to tolerate three Mrs. Pierres instead of one, if only once a week or month. Liz only worried about Stampson. The last time the ladies came over, they sat him at the piano and made him play until they were too drunk to notice Liz had turned on a record and taken the boy to bed.

Mrs. Pierre appeared in the bathroom just as Liz helped Stampson step into his undies. She called to Stampson, ignoring her own daughter.

"I have something for you young man." Mrs. Pierre held whatever it was behind her back as Liz stood and prepared to object. If there was anything her son needed, she had no problem getting it. The only handout she wanted from Mrs. Pierre came on Fridays, in cash. Stampson skipped over to Mrs. Pierre. Once in front of her, she leaned down and pointed to her cheek for a kiss. Stampson glanced back at his mother who looked away. Stampson obliged.

"I have something really special I want you to wear today."

“What about me, Mama?” Annie spoke up, waving her hand through the air like she was back in school.

“You’re going to stay in the kitchen with Liz, so what you’re wearing is just fine. She needs your help today. Don’t you want to help Liz?”

“No.” Annie muttered, again ignored.

“I have the perfect little outfit for you young man.” Mrs. Pierre revealed an all white short set. A red-checkered bow tie hung from the hanger, along with a white pair of patent leather shoes and red socks. “You have to look your best today while you perform all those songs we’ve been practicing. Wouldn’t you like that?”

“Oh boy! Yes, ma’m.”

“You don’t have to say ma’m, I told you call me Aunt Zeldona.”

“Thank you, Auntie—”

“Aunt. Just Aunt Zeldona.”

“Thank you, Aunt Zeldona.”

“Well come on now, let’s go in my room and I’ll help you get dressed.”

“Mrs. Pierre?” Liz called.

She heard Liz, but decided it best to keep on walking.

The women arrived at noon and not a minute later. Liz never cared enough to learn any of their names during previous visits. Especially since they hadn’t cared enough to use hers. She thought she’d heard them refer to her as Nigger Liz, as though Nigger was her preferred title. They called her Nigger Liz, but let her son eat at their table, telling riddles and jokes until Mrs. Pierre was ready to show off his talent. One of

the old biddies questioned whether the boy was ‘Nigger Liz’s’ and Mrs. Pierre laughed, cursed, and said that *Stanford* was her nephew from up north. She went into a long story about his visiting for the summer and other lies about his father and mother. Liz listened from the kitchen, touching two fingers to her lips to quiet Annie’s sobs so she could accurately hear what was being said. She listened as she had before when Mrs. St. Pierre told the story of how little Annie had a skin disease that kept her from going to school or taking part in most social activities. Her skin disease was so severe and so sensitive that she had to keep her out of sight at all times.

No sooner did Mrs. Pierre finish with her fictionalized account of Stampson’s life, did the piano playing start.

In the maid’s uniform that Mrs. Pierre had selected as a gift for today’s occasion, Liz prepared and offered everything as Mrs. Pierre instructed. They never had a real lunch, just canapés and liquor. Bread rounds with egg yolk and green pepper, all covered in caviar. Bread, mayonnaise, Swiss cheese, olives and anchovy paste. Liz couldn’t stomach any of it, but nibbled on the corn chips, potato chips, and nuts each time she had to refill the dishes and bowls. And when she wasn’t bringing out food, she was adding ice, juice, and liquor to their glasses. She never imagined that women so petite could be so greedy.

If she made the food and drink deliveries more often than necessary, it gave her an opportunity to check on Stampson. Mrs. Pierre had a record player and could have just as easily played her dry little tunes for her guests, but instead she put Stampson on display. Liz wanted to be upset each time she joined them in the living room. She



watched firsthand as they spilled everything that was supposed to go into their mouth on the floor and furniture like they always did. But of uttermost importance was her baby Stampson. She was certain to take quick glances at him as his little fingers bent and stretched across the piano keys, his little legs dangled and pumped like the piano bench was a swing. Liz couldn't help but chuckle. She couldn't yank him away just yet. His daddy, a mediocre white jazz musician himself, would be so proud. Liz realized again that she would have to get to California to show him how talented his boy had become. Maybe then he'd leave his wife.

"Do you remember that birthmark I had on my face, Gretchen?" The grey-haired white woman crossed and uncrossed her ankles as she leaned forward to touch her face for everybody to see.

"Oh, my! I didn't even notice--"

"It's disappeared! What did you do?"

"I found a doctor that specializes in that sort of thing. He removes moles, excessive hair, birthmarks—any kind of blemish. For the right price he'll take care of just about anything for you."

"Get out of town." Mrs. Pierre plopped right next to the woman and examined her face closely, even taking the woman's chin in her hands to lift and twist her head. She wanted to assure that she saw the spot from all angles. "I don't believe that thing is really gone. How long did it take?"

“I went for a few days, but imagine if that thing covered my whole face or body! I bet he’d still find a way to get rid of it—in just a month, no less. He’s an amazing man. He’s been in all the medical journals and newspapers.” Mrs. Pierre covered her mouth.

“You really think if your birthmark covered your entire body that he could get rid of it in just a month?”

“I believe in this man. He’s that good, Zeldona.”

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In the weeks that passed, Liz’s mornings were quite different from the others. Her day no longer began with bath preparations or scrubbing Annie like a greasy skillet. She had even been spared from performing bleaching cream rubs. At first, Liz was delighted to have more time alone with Stampson.

Without Mrs. Pierre’s knowledge, Liz had hired a new staff member. Stampson swept the floors and his mother mopped. Liz washed the dishes while Stampson dried. Each day Mrs. Pierre left a longer list of chores, and each day the two completed the tasks faster than the last; proceeded by hours spent with Annie’s books, games, and Stampson’s pleas to play the piano. At first, weary of Mrs. Pierre’s early return, Liz refused to let the boy even walk by the piano. But once the Pierres had proven a schedule, Stampson and Liz did whatever they wished until right before sundown.

At the sound of Mrs. Pierre’s high-heel clicks up the front walk, Stampson rushed to a spot on the floor with his marbles and Liz stood in the doorway to await Mrs. Pierre’s first set of instructions. Annie was usually draped in a blanket that covered the top of her head and dragged across the floor. She nearly tripped over the blanket on

occasion. Liz didn't miss her time with Annie at first, especially since Mrs. Pierre rarely let the girl leave her room. The only times Liz saw Annie was when she left the house for her doctor's appointment and when she returned, each time wearing that ridiculous white blanket.

One morning, instead of the front door closing, Liz heard the sound of bath water running. Afraid that she'd overslept or forgotten something Mrs. Pierre instructed her to do, she leaped out of bed, and hustled down the hall to the bathroom. She never bothered to knock and instead took the open door as an invitation to enter. She only expected to see Annie waiting patiently on the toilet seat, but there Annie and Mrs. Pierre stood staring back at one another.

"Ma'm?" Liz spoke, as though she'd been called.

She obviously caught Mrs. Pierre off guard the way the woman jumped and put a hand over her heart as though to calm it. Before Liz could move any closer, the woman grabbed the towel at Annie's feet and swooped it around her like a cape.

"I can take care of this, ma'm." Liz said.

"We don't need your help this morning." Mrs. Pierre snapped, but Liz moved closer anyway. As she neared, she reached out to remove the towel from Annie, but Mrs. Pierre pushed the girl away. "Can I help you with something?"

Liz stepped back into her place and put her hands at her side again.

"I can take care of this, ma'm."

"I said we don't need your help."

"What's wrong with her?"

“What do you mean what’s wrong with her? She’s perfectly fine. Everything is working out just as the doctor promised. He promised a month and . . .” Mrs. Pierre paused to look back at Annie. “We’re expecting to see results any day now. Then we can pack up and go be with her father. Just as soon as I get her white enough again. He’s found a new house for us in a perfect little town, but I’m afraid they won’t understand her skin condition. But we’re going to fix that, aren’t we Annie? We’re going to fix that for Daddy.”

Liz pushed Mrs. Pierre aside and yanked the towel from Annie’s body. What she saw made her squeeze her eyes shut and cover her mouth. But the image remained with her until she stumbled back in an attempt to escape her own thoughts and senses.

“Oh, Lord, Mrs. Pierre. What have you done?”

“She’s fine. No treatment is perfect. She’s just having a few side effects.”

Annie’s hair was plastered to her scalp like a cheap doll. Circular red and white patches covered her body in several places and blackened scabs covered her back, chest, and arms. When Annie saw Liz’s reaction, she burst into a fit of tears and wailed so loud it seemed to weaken her to the floor. Water from the bathtub began to overflow, but neither woman moved to turn the faucet off. Instead, Liz kneeled, pulled the child into her arms and held her. Each time she looked down at her, she hugged her closer and rocked harder. She hugged the child until she stopped crying and then Liz released a bit of emotion herself.

“You’ve touched her enough.” Liz repeated several times before Mrs. Pierre decided to leave the bathroom altogether.

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Liz rubbed the *Golden* brand cocoa butter—the brand she used herself—into Annie’s skin as she wondered where Stampson had run off to. Before going to look for him, she tried to fix her mouth to tell Annie what a beautiful little girl she was, but just couldn’t do it. She’d gone this long without developing a relationship with the girl and decided it best that things stay that way. She didn’t want to know what horrors the doctors had performed to make Annie’s skin look like she’d come close to hell’s fires—there was nothing that could be done about it anyway. This was just another job and soon there’d be enough money for California. She only had a few more weeks, although she wished minutes. Annie would be fine, Liz convinced herself.

When Annie’s body was covered in a shiny glow—scabs, burns, and all, Liz took the girl’s hand and stepped into the hallway. She called Stampson’s name right away and looked both ways for him to appear. She heard nothing. She called for him again and walked down the winding front steps, stretching her neck high then low for a view of him.

By the time she got to the first floor, she heard the voices from the kitchen. Annie wasn’t moving fast enough, so Liz lifted the child onto her hip and headed toward the direction of the sounds. Mrs. Pierre was in the kitchen on her knees, rubbing something onto the top of Stampson’s hands as he crunched on something. Liz placed Annie back down and rushed over to grab Stampson’s cheeks.

“What did she give you?” She shouted into his face. Stampson froze. The times when his mother yelled at him or anybody had been few.

Liz repeated her question.

“Candy.”

“Spit it into my hand.” She gripped the bottom of his face and squeezed tighter and tighter.

“Liz, you’re being quite absurd.” She heard the crazy in Mrs. Pierre’s voice, and squeezed Stampson’s chin harder as he pushed out the small brown crumbs from his tongue onto her hand.

“What is this?” Liz asked nobody in particular.

“Candy, just like he said.”

“What kind of candy?” Liz walked to the sink and rinsed the pieces under the faucet before taking a closer examination. “This ain’t candy.” When Zeldona didn’t respond quickly enough, Liz raised her voice again. “What is it?”

“It’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“If you’re giving it to my child it’s plenty for me to worry about.”

“Oh, Liz, you’re getting all upset over nothing. I wouldn’t do anything to harm Stampson. You know that. He’s my little angel.”

“Mama my hand is burning.” Stampson stood on his tiptoes and held his red hands up to Liz’s chest.

“Honestly, he looked a little dark this morning when I saw him. When I asked him what you all had been up to, he said you all had been playing outside—*in the sun*. So, I got some of Annie’s skin pills and some of her cream for him.”

“I don’t need you to do anything for Stampson, Mrs. Pierre. He’s just fine.”

“Certainly, he’s fine now, thanks to me.”

“Can I have some oatmeal now?” Annie asked as she patted Liz’s thigh.

“It’s burning, Mama.” Stampson cried. He flapped his hands around again in front of her chest as Liz struggled to lift him from the floor. Liz felt no pity for Annie’s hunger cries and pushed the girl out of the way.

Liz walked Stampson over to the sink, turned on the cold water, and began to drown his hands in dishwashing soap. She rubbed and scrubbed his hands while he sat on the counter. Unlike Annie, Stampson wasn’t the whining or crying type, so when Liz heard the boy sniffle and saw the tears drain from his eyes, the burning somehow traveled from his hands and through her body. Liz instructed Stampson to keep his hands underneath the running water and turned back to Mrs. Pierre who had nerve to smile.

“I just wanted to help you with Stampson like you help me with Annie. He’s such a lovely child, but if you don’t take the proper precautions, he won’t stay that way for long.”

“What did you rub on my boy?”

“Mama, don’t be mad at Aunt Zeldona, she just wants to help us.” Stampson said through his tears.

“Keep your hands under that water and hush.”

“Stampson is a very special child. I love that boy like he was my own. I just wanted to help—”

“What did you rub on my boy’s skin?” Liz asked again as Mrs. Pierre backed away toward the kitchen table. For each two steps she took backward, Liz took one large step forward.

“You’re being absurd, Liz.”

“What did you put on his skin!?” Liz shouted as she lunged toward Mrs. Pierre and made a grab for the white jar. Mrs. Pierre refused to give the object up and struggled to elbow and knee Liz to keep her away. Liz did everything except choke Mrs. Pierre as she rocked the woman’s body back and forth, scratched, and repeatedly yelled for the woman to tell her what she’d spread on her child.

Just as Mrs. Pierre unwillingly released the jar, one of her heels wobbled and she lost her balance. Liz stood back and examined the jar instead of acknowledging what she assumed to be Mrs. Pierre’s physical overreaction to a lost battle. Liz mouthed the words on the label and looked up just in time to see the side of Mrs. Pierre’s head hit the edge of the kitchen table. The woman uttered a moan before collapsing to the floor and hitting the other side of her head on the tile.

Liz waited for the blood. She waited for movement. There wasn’t a sound in the kitchen except the water from the faucet. Suddenly reminded that there were still two children in the room, Liz rushed to the sink and grabbed Stampson. She clutched her baby to her chest as she felt his wet hands palm her back.

“Shhhhh . . .” She tried her best to calm the children’s cries, but only bothered to physically comfort Stampson. While her child nuzzled his head into her neck, Liz patted the boy’s head as she rocked him back and forth like he was a newborn again. She paced



the kitchen for a moment. Her eyes met Annie's and shifted to the girl's stiff mother. Liz's mind went blank.

“Can I go to California with you?” Annie rubbed snot from her nose onto the back of her hand and whispered.

Liz shook her head, but realized that if Mrs. Pierre didn't lift herself from that floor in the next few minutes, that she wouldn't have many choices. Her next acts would have to be decided quickly and without remorse.

Liz checked again for blood, but this time stepped a little closer.

She would have to take Annie with her.

## DOTTING THE IRIS

For \$6 an hour Ira Jean returned tourists to the glory of the old south at every fifteen after the hour. Trapped in a thirty-minute time cycle, she described Monroe Plantation's architecture and the fabled events that occurred in its various rooms. Real Texas history—beatings, murders, rapes, and riots were omitted. Ira Jean upheld the strict guidelines. Buddy Monroe, the owner, made the rules. With each tour, she longed to tell the stories her grandparents had passed on to her about the plantation. Her own children were long gone and now there were only the tourists left. She agreed to follow the rules until the right tourists made her decide otherwise.

Ira Jean wore the required uniform every day and washed it once a week. An illustration of Monroe Plantation covered the back of her beige polo like a tacky tattoo. Her name, embroidered in black across the front pocket is in a font so small an ant would need glasses to read it. She kept her polo tucked tightly into the elastic waist of her khaki pants whose hem covered white slouch socks and matching orthopedic shoes. A white scarf covered the grey cornrows with braided tips that barely reached her neck. Ira Jean was the lone tour guide, the only expert on these grounds, but her uniform looked more appropriate for a fast food joint.

She decided early on to never start her tours with “welcome.” She never clapped for attention. When she was ready, the memorized words, sentences, and paragraphs dribbled from her mouth and people quieted themselves to listen to the rusty brown woman just months away from collecting her social security.

“There will be no talk of ghosts or hauntings on this tour,” Ira Jean said at the start of each tour. Before she mentioned anything else, she told them something that most people rarely considered until she mentioned it. After ten years, Ira Jean swore she’d heard and seen it all. Whites didn’t want to talk about the horrors of slavery and blacks seemed embarrassed or angered by it, so unless directly asked, Ira Jean left those details out to keep things pleasant. Most of the tourists never bothered to ask why the slave cabins were destroyed (but luckily rebuilt for the bed and breakfast guests). Nobody wanted to know whether the pecan, dogwood, and oak trees, were planted by slaves, immigrants, or convicts from nearby prison farms. All people wanted to do was snap their pictures, ask personal questions about the current owner, touch stuff they knew they shouldn’t, sneak off to private rooms, and do just about everything else that went beyond their \$10 entrance fee.

During the tours, Ira Jean plastered on her best dentured smile, spoke slowly, and fixed her index finger to guide people’s vision when necessary. Her tours began on time, on one of the two front parallel stone staircases, rain or shine. She usually ran through the basics, pointing out the home’s likeness to a Grecian temple (maybe if you squinted), the pillars and patio that surrounded the entire building (paint covered the decay), and how the original owners considerately kept the floor to ceiling windows open in the summertime to keep the slaves cool while they worked (most of the windows were put in during the 1990s). It was also absolutely necessary to point out that no slaves were ever hung from the dozens of oak trees that lined the front pebbled entrance, but only if someone mentioned slaves. According to the owner, the Monroe family just didn’t run

that sort of plantation. Slaves didn't even realize they were slaves. They were happy. Content. Jubilant. They danced, sang, and played just as much as their white owners. It was no surprise that they didn't even want freedom when it was offered to them in 1865. As a matter of fact, most of the plantation slave descendants still lived nearby, including Ira Jean herself.

The opening lines of Ira Jean's final Saturday tour of the day remained the same. "There will be no stories of ghosts or hauntings on this tour." The black couple that stood before her looked around, wondering if they were the only ones interested in a plantation walk on such a breezy day. Ira Jean didn't bother to wait for more people, nor did she check her watch to assure that it was exactly 15 after the hour.

The couple stepped closer to Ira Jean, wanting to be certain that they absorbed each detail she prepared to offer them. The lanky gentlemen wore eyeglasses that gave him a scholarly appearance. He fumbled around with the camera hanging from his neck and then allowed his gaze to focus on the wreath adorned 10-foot door before him. His frowning female companion dug through an oversized purse in search of something. When she finally found it, her facial expression changed and she revealed a book, which she waved in front of the gentlemen's face. He shook his head and pushed the book away as though it were a worrisome insect.

"The name is Ira Jean." She pointed to her embroidered name. "Before we begin I have to point out a few house rules. You may not *touch* or remove anything found inside the Monroe Plantation. You may not step over the velvet ropes. The use of flash photography is strictly prohibited. Eating and drinking is not allowed and if you're

currently holding anything of the sort in your hands I ask that you dispose of the item or items in the trash receptacles to your left and/or right. And at this moment I request that you please put away and/or turn off your cellular devices. Are there any questions before we officially began?” Ira Jean studied the woman’s afro and cowry shell earrings before shifting her focus to the man’s receding hairline. Neither paid attention to her instructions.

“Where are you two from?” Ira Jean didn’t normally get sidetracked from her tour, but black tourists were so rare that she couldn’t help it.

“Houston.” The man said, nearly unheard.

“Oh, I’ve never been to Houston before.” The two stood stiffly uncertain of how to respond. They were ready for the tour to begin. Taking the hint, Ira Jean stuttered out her first lines.

“Philanthropist and community activist Buddy Monroe, Monroe Plantation’s current owner, thanks you kindly for joining us for today’s Texas-sized tour.” Ira Jean said. She sounded like a live commercial. “He hopes that you’ll be pleased with everything you see, learn, and hear today, and that you will most certainly consider telling a friend. Monroe Plantation is also available for conferences, weddings, parties, and numerous other social gatherings—”

“Are you familiar with this book?” The woman interrupted as she shoved a thick text in Ira Jean’s direction. Ira Jean tilted her head sideways and mouthed the title. Today wouldn’t be the first time that she would feign ignorance about it. Buddy had

nerve to write it and the publishers were foolish enough to sell it in places other than the plantation gift shop.

“No.” Ira Jean knew if she answered yes, there would be more questions. No was the safe answer. She hoped no was the response that would conclude the tour quickly.

“We came across that book a few months ago and some of the information just didn’t seem accurate.” The man tapped the cover of the text.

“We hope to gather a bit of research of our own today.” The woman said. “We thought maybe we could write a book of our own.”

“You won’t hear any of those stories on this tour.” Ira Jean took the book and flipped through a few pages before she handed it back. “Somebody just wrote that to get you and your \$10 here.”

“But you could tell us the real stories that you know about the property, right?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Ira Jean eyed the oak trees for signs of Buddy. The one time she’d decided to tell people what she considered to be the truth, he’d spent thirty minutes reprimanding her for it. *If you ain’t heard it from me, then goddamn it, you ain’t got no business tellin’ it*, he’d said repeatedly.

“I can only present the information to you as it has been taught to me.” Ira Jean gritted her dentures and said. She expected further plea, but the couple looked on in silence. On cue, Ira Jean cleared her throat again, stared off into the distance and returned to the script.

“Monroe Plantation is also available for conferences, weddings, parties, and numerous other social gatherings.” She backtracked. “Regardless of what type of event

you decide suitable for our plantation, be assured that each event is uniquely designed to suit elite standards. Past guests, including George Bush himself, have offered nothing but the highest regards for their experiences here on the Monroe Plantation grounds.” She smiled as though the former president were a close friend.

The couple chuckled.

“Now, if you’ll take a look to your left,” Ira Jean waved her hand to guide their vision, “Before you depart our property, Mr. Monroe invites you to enjoy some of the finest cuisine this great state of Texas has to offer right here at our restaurant, Plantation Pickins.” The cuisine may have been fine, but Ira Jean never ordered anything from there, preferring instead to feast on fruits and vegetables from her plantation garden.

“Is it five-star?” The man asked.

“I think so.” Ira Jean avoided eye contact. “In 1840, Glenard Arrington gave his newly wed daughter, Emily, what was then *50,000* acres of land assigned to him through a Spanish land grant. She would begin a new life here in Texas with her husband and eager slaves.”

“How did he get so much land? Most land owners received around 20,000 to 30,000.” The woman scribbled something down on her notepad and turned to take another look at the plantation grounds.

“I’m glad you asked. Glenard Arrington knew some pretty important people—”

“Like the creditors that harassed him until he decided to abandon his Georgia home for a fresh start in Texas?”

“That information hasn’t been confirmed.”

“Lucky enough for him, his only living daughter happened to catch the eye of Kenneth Monroe whose father was the largest landowner in Shelton County. He owned numerous plantations and—”

Ira Jean’s brow furrowed as she decided it best to talk over the man’s know-it-all rant. She decided that quickly that the couple planned on making her tour difficult.

“Monroe Plantation went on to become one of the third largest cotton and sugar producing sites in the state of Texas. Many free African Americans journeyed across state lines just for an opportunity to help build the vastly adorned home you will see before you today. Those same individuals also helped to entertain some of this country’s most influential politicians and dignitaries.”

“Entertain how?” The man asked.

“Like who?” The woman questioned.

Ira Jean sighed. She hadn’t wanted this tour to be a long one. She’d given six already without a break and hoped that the black couple would spare her.

“Stephen F. Austin.”

“And who else?” The man snapped a photograph of Ira Jean as she scratched an answer from her scalp.

“Davey Crockett.”

“And when did you say this plantation was built again?” The woman asked.

“1840.”

The couple gave each other a look.

“Both of those people died in 1836.” The man said.



Ira Jean kept the tour moving. “It should also be noted that the plantations black residents—”

“Residents?” The couple stressed.

“—were known far and wide for being well-mannered and enthusiastically willing to please.”

The couple exchanged a few unspoken words and laughed, acknowledging the ridiculousness of what was just said. This caught Ira Jean off guard for a moment. She’d been doing this for ten years, so there wasn’t much that surprised her any more. She decided it best to ignore any more of their questions from that point on.

“As we enter, please take notice of the 14-foot high ceilings throughout the home.” Ira Jean twisted the hand painted porcelain knob and used her body weight to push the door open. “In mentioning this, it should be apparent that no expenses were spared in the construction of Monroe Plantation. Emily and Kenneth Monroe’s one desire was to ensure that their seven children would grow up having only the very best. Which they most certainly did.”

The woman turned a few pages in her book. “Didn’t all six of those children die—”

“Everyone eventually dies.” Ira Jean interrupted. She hated tourists like them. They always swore they knew everything. Acting like they didn’t need her for *their* tour. She again reminded herself not to respond to their next question or comment.

“Yes, but according to historical records, three children were sterile, two died of illness, and only one went on to have—”

“I can only share the information as it’s taught to me, miss.” Ira Jean knew if she told the truth about one thing, she’d have to tell the truth about even more. “Now, if you will, please join me in the entrance hall.”

Once inside, Ira Jean used both hands to push the front door closed behind them. She then turned and raised her arms halfway through the air. “This, my friends, is what the Monroe’s called Descendents Hallway.” Her arms spread to capture it all. “Please take a moment to walk past the adjoining rooms and focus your attention on the wall portraits. Many plantations are only fortunate enough to have one or two family portraits, but the Monroes, wanting to keep a sort of visual track of their bloodline, had portraits created in celebration of the birth of every newborn child.” Except the little black ones that the Monroe men fathered in the slave quarters, Ira Jean considered.

The portraits were another item on the list of narrated lies. Ira Jean watched the hired help hang them some years ago, curious as to what Buddy might write up on his index cards. She knew she’d recite every absurd word to the tourists. Standing there with the couple, she made note of the way the emotionless blue eyes of the featured family focused in every direction except straight ahead. Even the way the family seemed to sit uncomfortably in their fine clothing on a porch that looked nothing like anything around these parts.

Although she knew she would have to say otherwise, the truth was the current owner purchased the artistic rendering at an auction. They were no relation to any former member of this household. Hanging the portrait proved that history was whatever the owner wanted it to be at Monroe Plantation. And for only \$6 an hour, who was Ira Jean

to ever object? With a son that wouldn't write, call, or visit, this plantation was just about all she had and she might not even live long enough to achieve full ownership. She thought that by buying it, she could make peace with the dead by rewriting the lies into truths.

"On the hall tables you will also notice photos of the Monroes with some of their house servants. I must stress that you must not enter any of the adjoining rooms at this time. Again, please focus on the portraits, photos, and the elegant crystal and brass chandelier purchased by Kenneth Monroe for the then astounding price of \$180." Ira Jean pointed, but the couple didn't bother to look. "As you can imagine, that was a great sum of money back then. Many of the interior features and finishes you will see today have been refinished and reinstalled in their original form."

"Hmmm . . . that's interesting. I assume you mean the floors and railings?" The man asked as he rubbed the sole of his shoe over the hardwood floor before kneeling down to run his fingertips over the dust.

"What about them?" Ira Jean asked as she stepped closer, hoping to see what he saw.

"Refinished? Reinstalled?"

"Yes, sir." Ira Jean nodded as the man raised an eyebrow, uncertain of whether the reply actually answered his question. Ira Jean knew what she was doing.

"Oh, is this the same chandelier that Kenneth Monroe purchased after selling the slaves from the revolt that occurred in 1852?" The woman, now holding open a different book, stared at the text and then looked up at the chandelier again.

“The residents—”

“Slaves?” The woman corrected.

“The *residents* of Monroe Plantation had *no* reason to *ever* consider a revolt. The Monroe family was good to them and often times paid them for their services, something that was unheard of in these parts back then—which I’m sure you know.” Ira Jean answered, trying her best to keep it simple.

In reality, the woman only had the date wrong. As far as Ira Jean knew, in 1854, after discovering the torturous acts Emily Monroe had committed to over 20 slaves in the upstairs attic, the slaves of Monroe Plantation plotted for over a week before they finally took action. After an indescribable amount of weapons were gathered, two followers betrayed the leaders. Kenneth Monroe, uncertain of who could be trusted, sold the betrayers, suspected leaders, and just because, even a few children. The money garnered from these sales enabled him to have a new family portrait hung, a chandelier to be shipped in from France, and red carpeting to be added to the sweeping spiral staircase which carried his family up to their second-floor bedrooms for a sound sleep.

“So, did the Monroe’s have different artists complete these family renderings?” The man waved a finger in front of the eyes of one of the portraits.

“Yes.” Ira Jean replied, nodding her head. “Different artists were used each and every time. Interesting you should notice.” The man picked up his camera, turned off the flash and moved down the line to snap photos for later inspection. Ira Jean knew he’d discovered something strangely different about each one. She also knew that since he was such a smart man, he’d realize that not one single member of the Monroe family

appeared in any of the paintings. She could only hope that he wouldn't realize it until he arrived home later.

“Now, shall we step into the white room, if you please?”

“This is the room I was telling you about!” The woman tugged on her partner's sleeve and led the way into the adjoining room. Before Ira Jean could begin her lines, the woman had her next book cracked open to recite what she'd discovered.

No one questioned how the den, titled the 'white room' for the tour, became aptly named. Most people always assumed the obvious. After all, the white room had to be named so because of the painted white walls, ceiling, fireplace, floors, or maybe even the white woman's portrait crookedly hung on the wall. The white room—once a spring green, then lilac and gold, and eventually a box brown room—was where they found Buddy's younger brother's body in 1967. Buddy and Conroe Monroe inherited a house that they never deserved, a house that should have instead been restored to its so-called former glory long before they got their hands on it. Instead, the boys spent much of their time in the white room doing white lines, heating white powders in spoons for injection purposes, and popping white pills. A failed hippie, Conroe left his friends in California to return to the home where he remembered horseback riding, fishing, and hunting as a child. During his adult years on the plantation, he would go on to create new memories for a non-existent future that revolved around folk music, altered mind states, and cash-only sex.

But Conroe's stories were not part of Ira Jean's plantation tour, nor were the reasons or ways of destroying the historic mansion.

“The White Room, a room used mainly for entertaining . . .” The man stood next to his partner as she read some historical facts Ira Jean had never heard before. She assumed the book must have been recently published. Ira Jean knew it would feature nothing about how Conroe Monroe, while high on his chosen illegal whiteness, had torn into walls with his bare hands creating anachronisms that would confuse future contractors. Somehow he managed to stuff an aquarium into the whole, although he never put any fish or water in it. He had plans to add 4 orders of sea monkeys to the thing, but the shipment never came. On another wall he painted psychedelic distractions with spray cans, watercolors, and makeup. From the ceiling he’d removed and practically destroyed the gilded tale and crystal chandelier, replacing it with a disco ball. Nobody was certain where he acquired the oversized mirror, but he found a way to glue it up so that the only way to get it down was to knock out the entire wall.

Also featured during Conroe’s reign was Rickie Tickle stickers which covered the windows and walls, black-lighting that revealed delusional secret messages on 1964 presidential candidate Barry Goldwater’s posters (which under the influence of coke made perfect sense), and audiences of troll dolls lined the white floors. Nobody understood his purpose for having or setting these items up in certain ways except Conroe, but Buddy claimed otherwise if pressed. Even the slave cabins, sugar mill, and whipping post met their burning demise after Conroe decided that slavery was pretty fucked up. Too fucked up to have any symbols lingering around for him to have to look at each day of his short life. *We don’t need to remember that shit man. That shit is probably painful for our black brothers and sisters.* Of course, these sentiments were

silenced when the fire department arrived, unsure of what questions to ask the red-eyed, longhaired, bizarrely dressed young man with the unusual grin.

“I’m just saying, let her give the tour.” The man whispered. “Let her talk.”

Ira Jean mentally rejoined the tour and picked up where she left off.

“The pure whiteness of this room was not simply something the Monroes decided upon because it looked good, but Emily Monroe requested this specific color to offset the beauty of her three lovely daughters Prudence, Victoria, and Lydia.”

“Didn’t Lydia die?” Easing away from her partner, the woman opened her book again and began to scan the pages. “Yeah, Lydia died at the age of 17 from cholera after a trip to New Orleans.”

The man nodded. “That’s right, New Orleans had one of the largest cholera outbreaks—”

“Yellow fever.” The two went silent, wanting to hear Ira Jean’s quiet words. “And it was Prudence who died at age 16, just weeks before her wedding day to a man that was 40 years her senior. Luckily for Victoria who married him on her sister’s behalf.”

“Cholera.” The woman stated again, turning pages in her book as though Ira Jean’s version of the story should have been there.

“Yellow fever.” Ira Jean said once more. “Kenneth Monroe was overly concerned for his daughter, just as a father should be. Unfortunately, many of the slaves themselves were ill at the time and nearby physicians wouldn’t dare check on *them*. The neighbors and the other family members—even Emily herself were afraid that they

might catch something if they tried to tend to her themselves. And with nobody available, Master Monroe had to turn to a Voodoo woman to save her.” Ira Jean lowered herself onto the one antique chair with its back to the window, pushing aside the ‘do not sit’ sign. The chair creaked from her weight and the couple came closer. The woman handed her partner a notepad and pen.

“She came all the way from New Orleans and stayed day and night by Prudence’s side, mixing and trying everything in the satchel she brought with her. People heard her uttering foreign words and songs, but in the end nothing worked. Prudence lay right there in that bed and died.” Ira Jean rubbed her hands on her pants, keeping her eyes focused on the floor. She’d never shared the story before, but knew it wouldn’t be found in any of their books.

“What happened to the Voodoo woman?” The man asked, still writing down her every word.

“Killed her.” Ira Jean met their eyes. “Emily Monroe went crazy and demanded that the Voodoo woman’s life be taken. Hell, they say Kenneth Monroe was half out of his mind anyway, so he had no problem obliging. So . . . he hung the Voodoo woman from the top of the staircase, but she didn’t die right away.” Ira Jean waved her finger from side to side and leaned closer like she was sharing a campfire story. “No, no, no. They say she had a tough neck or maybe it was the powers of the spirits she’d brought from New Orleans with her. But that Emily Monroe, she had so much evil in her that she went and got her husband’s rifle and shot the woman herself. The blood stained the floor for weeks.”



“Is Prudence the ghost that they say—”

“No, it’s the Voodoo Woman, it all makes sense, now. They said—”

“No ghost or stories of hauntings on this tour.” Ira Jean pushed herself back up using the wall behind her, leaving black fingerprints in its place.

“What else can you tell us about this room?” The man asked.

“I ain’t told you nothing yet.” Ira Jean allowed her speech to slip just slightly and considered Conroe’s story. Various antiques and objects caught her eye that reminded her of things she’d wanted to tell tourists, but never did. “Today this room is the one many people rent out for their own special events, but back then Emily Monroe used it to host events for her own daughters. One event in particular included a masked ball where her son met and married a politician’s daughter, but never consummated the marriage for what some say was a very obvious reason.” Ira Jean thought she spotted Buddy in the window and shifted the focus of her story. “You will note the hand-carved molds which line the ceilings throughout the house. It is said that an Irishman by the name of—”

“Is this also the room where the slaves lit Oscar Monroe on fire?” The woman interrupted as she turned in a circle to locate the exact spot.

“No.” Ira Jean quickly shook her head. “An Irishman by the name of Amargein Lennox was offered—”

“Did that actually happen at all?”

“Babe.”

“What? I want to know about the people who lived here. Who cares about the molding and mirrors. I can look all that stuff up online.”

“Who’s the woman in the painting?” The man changed the subject without regard for his partner’s excitement. He pointed to the woman in the portrait that hung over the Italian marble fireplace and glanced back at Ira Jean. “Is that Prudence? Her eyes are creepy, huh? Look at how they follow you all around.” He moved from side to side and even ducked down to test his theory.

“It’s called dotting the irises.” The woman said on Ira Jean’s behalf. “And that lady in the picture never lived here. It’s just someone they hung up for the men who visited to ask about. I see it still works.” The man hit the woman’s arm with the notepad as they shared a brief laugh.

“They burned Oscar Monroe’s body right there on that porch.” Ira Jean turned to the window and tapped the glass. Buddy suddenly appeared as his forehead met her fingertip from the other side. Frozen, Ira Jean moved only after Buddy waved for her to join him outside. She pardoned herself from the guests and made her way to the porch, moving faster than she thought possible.

“Well, what the hell do you think you’re doing in there?” Buddy tipped his straw hat back and rolled up the calico sleeves on his shirt. His chest poked out and his gut hung down below his pant’s belt. He was the type of boss that divided his time between stalking Ira Jean and a Jim Beam bottle. “I done heard you in there talking that foolishness.”

“I’m just doing my job.”

“You don’t get to decide what the hell you wanna say on this tour, Ira. Those people didn’t even pay—or did you bother notice that they’re not wearing wrist bands?”

“I didn’t notice.” Ira Jean stood before Buddy talking to him in the same nonchalant manner she always did, regardless of whether she realized her job was on the line.

“What was that story I heard you tell about the Voodoo woman? That’s not on the damn script, Ira. I ain’t never heard that shit in my life.”

“I know.”

“What do you mean ‘I know’?”

“It’s a story my grandmother shared with me.”

“Common sense says your grandma’s stories don’t belong on my tours.”

“But your lies do?”

“My lies? Is that what you just said? Now wait a minute, Ira.”

“They didn’t have the facts right. None of those books ever get the facts right.”

“I know that, that’s why I wrote a book my damn self.”

“I just wanted to tell them what I knew.”

“Obviously, you can’t get your so-called facts right either. I ain’t heard nothing about—oh, I get it, when colored folks show up you think you get to do what you wanna do? That’s what it is?”

“No.”

“Ain’t nothing I heard in there based on no facts that I gave you.” Buddy dug in his back pocket and pulled out a fresh set of typed index cards, but didn’t hand them over right away.

“I know.”

“You know the rules, Ira, don’t you? I mean, you see colored folks coming round and all the sense the good Lord gave you just goes out the window, huh?”

“Sir?”

“How many more lies would you have told if I hadn’t caught you?” Buddy asked, angered by Ira Jean’s silence. “I just happen to be walking by this here window and the next thing I know I hear some madness about a voodoo woman being hung.” He huffed. “Well, I just don’t know what to say, Ira Jean. I’m real disappointed in your lack of ethics right now.”

“They had a book and they wanted to know—”

“You ain’t the authority around here! You don’t get to decide when to tell your stories and when to read off of these cards.” He flapped the cards in front of her face and snatched them back. “And you wasn’t living back then so how the hell would you know what’s the truth and what’s not? I mean, really Ira, Oscar Monroe was burnt on this here porch? By who? What in good Lord’s.”

“It’s the truth.”

“I just don’t know what to say to you right now.” Buddy placed his hands on his hips and leaned back slightly. “I’ll tell you what. Get them folks outta there and tell them the tour is over. They didn’t even pay for Christ’s sake! You’re around here giving free tours full of lies!”

“Well, they were standing there asking me all those question and I guess I started thinking, it would be nice to have just this one day to share the stories like I know them.”

“You think people want to know about Voodoo and revolts . . . and . . . and . . . and mistreated slaves? God knows I don’t! And where do you get the nerve to think that you know more about this plantation than I do? Me and my brother was raised on this here plantation and the only history that people need to know about it is what I tell you.” Buddy stomped toward Ira Jean and shoved the index cards into her hands, gripping her fingers tightly around the stack to ensure that she wouldn’t drop them. “I know this plantation! I know the history—and this plantation’s history is what I say it is. That’s the kinda history people are interested in hearing, the history that I give them.”

“Mr. Monroe, you’re not the only one who knows stories about this plantation.”

“And I told you that you ain’t got no stories. This plantation is mine. It’s got my family’s blood on it. You can’t disagree with history. You just work here. You do what I tell you. I can’t understand what would make you up and decide to start telling your so-called truths today.” And with that, Buddy marched himself down the porch steps and back into the yard somewhere unseen.

“I don’t know either, Mr. Monroe.”

Ira Jean returned to her tour. She never told the couple they needed to pay and continued to share her stories, as she knew them. The couple even shared a few of their own from their studies and books. When the tour was done, Ira Jean knew that it would be her last.

## CONCLUSION

For the introduction to my thesis, I did not want to devote time to quotations that defined the short story. I also did not want to discuss my writing techniques or what authors and literary stories influenced me. I felt as though each story's development and my ideas about their development should be the focus instead. My overall intent was to present three stories that would demonstrate my growth as a fiction writer.

The stories included in this thesis showcase my passion for research and how a single statement, photograph, or encounter sparks something in the creative writer's mind. Being the close friend of a history teacher has forced me to reconsider the stories of America's history. In *Places to Lie*, what connects my stories is the history—the historical details that people make up, get wrong, or overall refuse to acknowledge. Also, each story brings forward a black woman who realizes that truth and happiness may not always mix—and when one knows the truth, one can only remain silent for so long.

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## **VITA**

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